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Tradition as a Homeland to Return to: Transnational Religious Identity of the Post-Soviet Orthodox Jewry

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the outcome of a long-term field research into the transnational identity of the post-Soviet Orthodox Jewry. It analyzes biographical interviews taken between 2015 and 2018 in St. Petersburg and Minsk to define the religious identity and day-to-day practices of post-Soviet Orthodox Jews. In this article, I argue that the communities of post-Soviet Orthodox Jews is a new socio-cultural phenomenon with no historical prototypes. As to the research methodology, it was a combination of the transnational approach, random choice case-study targeting post-Soviet Orthodox communities of Orthodox Jewry in large cities, and the biographical method. The backbone of the post-Soviet Orthodox communities of different strains of Judaism was formed in 1990–2008. It is made up of three generations of men and women born in the late 1940s–1960s, mid-1960s–early 1970s, and the 1980s. Each of these generations is characterized by its own unique pattern of observance, the formation of which is directly conditioned by the circumstances of involvement in religious Jewry. The transnational pattern of observance of the Post-Soviet Orthodox Jews involves the model they confronted at the very beginning of their journey, the model they learned in overseas educational institutions or through incoming envoys and rabbis in the country of residence, and the model of balance between the required and possible in the modern post-Christian and post-atheist environment.

KEYWORDS

Post-Soviet Orthodox Jews, transnational religious identity, transnational approach, models of compliance, biographical method

Introduction

Academic study of the post-Soviet observant Jewry in a diversity of its congregations and modes of compliance is the only recently emerging ethnography of post-Soviet Jewish communities that remained in the former Soviet Union (Cooper, 1998, 2003; Golbert, 2001; Goluboff, 2003, 2008; Sapritsky, 2010). Work on ex-Soviet Jews in post-Soviet countries is still scarce and is highly dominated by the survey method, archival and statistical data (Sapritsky, 2010, p. 17). In this article, I invite the reader to get acquainted with the results of my research of the post-Soviet Orthodox Jewry from the perspective of their transnational patterns of identity, through which they construct trans-local discourses about the daily observance of the commandments. Russian-speaking Orthodox Jews of the post-Soviet space are an integral part of the transnational Jewish diaspora and contribute to the discourses of modern observant Jewry about the model of observance in modern conditions.

My field research of the post-Soviet Russian-speaking Lithuanian, Chabad and Hasidic communities of St. Petersburg and Minsk was launched in 2015. My focus was on the religious identity and day-to-day practices of post-Soviet Orthodox Jews. In the beginning, I invariably asked respondents to advise—who, in their opinion, should be interviewed. From time to time, I was asked the same counter questions:

- “Are you only interested in observing? We have men who come to support the *minyán*¹, but they have Russian wives”;
- “Do you need those who are strictly observant? I have a friend who is already observing and preparing to undergo conversion”;
- “Why don’t you talk to our people, who are here on holidays, do not observe, but respect and sympathize?”

After clarifying that I am only interested in observers, the respondents recommended to me “knock on my Facebook² account and see the names of my friends (...)”. In biographical interviews, mentioning the name of the first rabbi in the respondent’s life was often accompanied by an invitation to send a Facebook link to him. Further, regardless of my reaction, they usually sent this link through WhatsApp³ messenger. Explaining to me the importance of “interviewing this particular rabbi”, the respondents emphasized that they continue to communicate through social networks with those with whom they once began their journey to Jewry. Moreover, they often prefer to ask a question not to the rabbi of their local community, but “through the Internet to their rabbi”. My next discovery was the diverse world of transnational diaspora ties between Russian-speaking Orthodox enclaves.

As the collection of biographical interviews progressed, it became increasingly clear that the vast majority of respondents came from Jewish families who did not follow the commandments and were not familiar with the Jewish/Judaic way of life. The revival of Jewry, initiated in the 1990s, revealed a complete loss of the connection between the present generations and the previous forms of communal life and daily

¹ In Orthodox Judaism, that is the quorum of 10 adult Jews required for communal worship.

² Facebook™ is a trademark of Facebook Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries.

³ WhatsApp™ is a trademark of WhatsApp Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries.

observance of the commandments. This entailed an appeal to the experience of the Russian-speaking Orthodox diaspora in Israel and the United States, the arrival of those foreign rabbis and mentors who were ready to go to *perestroika* Russia to revitalize Judaism.

Most of the Chabad, Hasidic and Lithuanian post-Soviet communities were created with the support of the Israeli, American and European Orthodox enclaves of the Jewish diaspora. In interviews with eyewitnesses of those events, the thesis is clearly expressed that the environment of observant Russian-speaking Jews was formed in several stages. The first stage fell on the period of the 1980s and until the early 1990s, when disparate groups of Zionists, religious Zionists and the religious Jewish underground consolidated by mastering the practices of observing the commandments. The second phase took place in 1990–2008 and included the arrival of foreign rabbis who created the infrastructure for observance (synagogues, Jewish kindergartens, religious schools, *yeshivas*, kosher production) and the formation of rigid boundaries for dividing the Chabad, Hasidic and Lithuanian communities (Ostrovskaya, 2019).

The third stage started in 2008 and was marked by the mediatization of the communicative practices of observant Jewry throughout the post-Soviet socio-cultural space. The digitalization of Russian-speaking Orthodox Jewry has made it possible to synchronize and correlate the communicative practices of communities in different localities of the Jewish diaspora. Local communities and synagogues of various post-Soviet countries create their own Internet sites and pages on social media Facebook, VK⁴ (short for its original name VKontakte) and Instagram⁵. Their communications about day-to-day observance are intertwined with the numerous practices of religious Russian-speaking enclaves of the Jewish diaspora. The Internet and new media play a key role in bringing about such interweaving (Ostrovskaya, 2020).

Having studied the life of the Chabad, Hasidic, and Lithuanian communities of St. Petersburg, Minsk, and Kiev for quite a long time (2015–2020), I have come to the conclusion that they are very protective of their communal identities and are inclined to strongly exclusive and highly competitive models of religious observance. Their daily life gravitates towards the ghetto format within a wider non-Jewish urban culture. Each of the communities maintains a constant contact with those *yeshivas* of foreign Orthodox enclaves who participated in its foundation. Most of the Chabad, Hasidic and Lithuanian communities are under the leadership of foreign *rabbis* and *rabbanits*⁶, who stay for a long time in Russia and the CIS countries.

The core of the membership in the post-Soviet Orthodox Jewish communities consists of three generations: men and women born in the late 1940s–1960s, mid-1960s–early 1970s, and in the 1980s. Each of these generations has its own unique pattern of observance, which evolved as a result of the particular circumstances of their involvement in religious Jewry, the experience of communication with foreign rabbis of a particular strain of Judaism, receiving a religious education, participating

⁴ <https://vk.com> VK™ is a trademark of VKontakte LLC.

⁵ Instagram™ is a trademark of Instagram Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries.

⁶ Rabbanit—the wife of rabbi or the female relative of a rabbi, sometimes also an instructor herself.

in the life of a synagogue, and choosing further life strategies. According to different interviews, step-by-step those rabbis formatted the rigid boundaries which divided the Chabad, Hasidic and Lithuanian communities.

In this article, I argue that the communities of post-Soviet Orthodox Jews is a new socio-cultural phenomenon with no historical prototypes. It started as early as the late 1980s and continues evolving. Its identity is a complex and dynamic pattern resulting from religious and “social remittances” of observing Jews. To define this pattern, I employ the transnational approach and the concept of transnational religious networks involving transnational actors, religious practices, “religious remittance” and transnational religious identity (Lacroix, Levitt, & Vari-Lavoisier, 2016; Levitt, 2001, 2002, 2003; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004).

As for the research methodology, it was a random choice case study targeting post-Soviet Orthodox communities of observing Jewry in large cities. The biographical method, which has proven its viability in the research on hard-to-reach communities (Ostrovskaya, 2016), was employed in the field study to assess the level of respondents’ integrity at different ages and to reveal the key elements in their patterns of observance. The material was gathered through criteria-based sampling. The respondents were chosen according to the three main criteria: their place of residence, length of observance and generation. The respondents that met the chosen categories had the length of observance of at least 10 years, a permanent or temporary residence in St. Petersburg or Minsk, and belonged to one of the following age groups: those born in the 1950s, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, or in the 1980s. This article covers a selected number of 18 Minsk and 29 St. Petersburg interviews with Chabad and Migdal Ohr members⁷.

Transnational Network of the Post-Soviet Orthodox Jewry

I would like to start my analysis with a brief overview of the key notions of the concept of transnational religious networks and accompany it with illustrations from my research. The Orthodox communities of St. Petersburg and Minsk are different. The distinctive character of the observant Jewish community in Saint Petersburg I discussed in detail elsewhere (Ostrovskaya, 2016). Here I highlight only the main feature, which distinguishes it from the observant community in Minsk. The former is mainly Chabad with a decent infrastructure and secured “religious remittances”. Its members born in the mid-1960s and 1970s are in charge of communicating the traditional patterns. By contrast, Minsk dominated by the Lithuanian community involves in its transnational activities different generations with the most persistent adherents to the transnational pattern born in the 1980s.

Transnational actors or transmigrants come from different countries and stay in contact by sharing a common system of beliefs and religious practices. Among these

⁷ Since this research dealt with sensitive issues and its publication ought to comply with accepted ethical research guidelines, we find it is necessary to emphasize that all respondents were informed about the fact that I was conducting a sociological study with the intention of publishing a research article in an academic journal. Permission was obtained from the respondents with regard to transcribing their interviews and the quotes used in the publication were also approved.

actors are ethno-religious communities, religious organizations and religious leaders who interact with each other over the national borders (Faist, 2004; Haynes, 2001; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004).

Post-Soviet observing Jews involved in transnational religious communication tend to stress their cultural and social differences. They participate in “religious remittances” of the relevant transnational Jewish communities, as well as religious festivals and events. They spend holidays in Israel or the United States; attend overseas religious seminars; address broader transnational communities to solve their pressing ideological, material, financial, and other problems. This interaction involves both migrants to Israel or the United States and those who live in the countries of initial socialization, relatives and friends, foreign rabbis and emissaries settled in Russia and Belarus with their families or making trips there.

An in-depth analysis of the post-Soviet transnational landscape has revealed that Chabad and Lithuanian transnational organizations have been its most active parties. In the 1990s, they re-established the Jewish tradition in the countries of the former Soviet Union, spread the transnational pattern of daily religious practices in communities, as well as communicated the patterns of observance and basic religious education.

Transmitting beliefs and values to two or three other countries is typical of both religious communities and individual actors (Levitt, 2002, p. 2). This involves providing for religious organizations in other countries, fundraising, guest visits of religious mentors and religious teachers, religious consultations for believers in the countries of Exodus, pilgrimage, and shipping religious products (Levitt, 2003; Wuthnow & Offutt, 2008).

My interview questionnaire included a question about the basic set of the doctrines and practices for an observing Orthodox Jew. Most respondents stated that although the degrees of observance may vary community wise, the observance pattern differs from the kosher style. These fundamentals include Kashrut, Shabbat, three daily prayers for men, *Chuppah*⁸, the Jewish home, the *mikvah*⁹, and the family chastity rules. Regarding this question, Respondent T., 1972, born and living in St. Petersburg, the spouse of a rabbi, the headmaster of a women’s school, said the following:

Jewish religiosity is about observing Saturday, Jewish holidays, Kashrut laws of the family chastity. A woman is expected to dress modestly, which means covering her knees, elbows, and wearing a headgear or wig. A married woman goes to the mikvah. A religious man is prescribed a 3-time daily prayer in a synagogue with or without a minyan of 10 men. The degree of observance is relative: some are stricter than the others.

⁸ A Jewish wedding or a canopy under which the bride and groom stand during the Jewish wedding ceremony.

⁹ A ritual bath or bathing place for married women (for purification in accordance with Jewish law).

The daily routine of St. Petersburg and Minsk Jewish communities includes men's prayer in *minyán*, classes for women and studies of religious texts for men, family and communal Shabbats with optional overnight stays, and cyclical religious holidays. Some of the examples of transnational religious practices, apart from the Sabbath, are the wig as a mandatory headwear for observing married women, celebrations of Sukkot, Hanukkah, Passover, patterns for women's and men's fashion, etc.

Transnational religious practices include communities' financial transfers, fundraising in favor of a foreign subsidiary, charitable donations to overseas religious educational institutions, etc. (Wuthnow & Offutt, 2008, pp. 221–222).

For example, observant Jewry provides for Chabad envoys and communities created in different cities. Emissaries (*shluchim*) are commissioned to go to the former Soviet countries and build synagogues and necessary infrastructure, such as Jewish kindergartens, Jewish schools, *yeshivas* and *kolel*, dining rooms, kosher food stores and so on. Both Chabad and Lithuanian rabbis raise funds for local synagogues, Jewish religious schools for boys or girls.

Transnational religious practices also imply lectures, seminars, training sessions by religious leaders, teachers and scholars of one country in communities and affiliated religious groups of other countries (Offutt, 2011, p. 796).

Both Chabad and Lithuanian communities have been inviting rabbis from abroad, mainly from the USA and Israel. While Chabad *shluchim* tend to bring their families and remain in the host community for a long time, their Lithuanian counterparties prefer to go on trips and stay on if required. Along with this, experts on the Torah and Jewish religious tradition can come to give lectures; *rabbanits* would teach women religious chastity, the concept of the Jewish home, the roles of spouses and mothers, etc.

There are objective and subjective dimensions to the above-mentioned transnational religious practices. The objective dimension is formed by the institutional communication between transmigrants and their home countries. For example, migrants securing their ties with the country of origin tend to join a religious organization, which they associated with before their migration (Levitt, 2001, p. 16). The subjective dimension means that religious commitment and religious practices are used for building social networks in a host country rather than for religious purposes, for example, for obtaining economic support, legal advice, expressing political interests, learning the language of the host country, visiting national schools, joining various hobby clubs, etc. (Carnes & Yang, 2004; Hagan & Ebaugh, 2003).

There are certain features of the subjective dimension for post-Soviet observing Jews. In the early stages of their return to the tradition, most respondents relied on religious practices to migrate and get integrated into the new network more easily. The subjective dimension for observing Jews meant abandoning the sociocultural and other contexts of the country of residence with the following involvement in the transnational network of observant Jewry.

Religious requirements compel believers to seek like-minded people and those who share this worldview. Lonely compliance is hardly possible because of kosher

food restrictions (meat of a properly slaughtered animal, dairy produce from kosher facilities); monthly immersion in the *mikvah* for women; three daily prayers in *minyan* for men, etc. Outside the community, it is difficult to carry out the key rites such as circumcision, the first haircut, *bar mitzvah* and *bat mitzvah*¹⁰, Chuppah, and funeral. The difficulties with implementing observance practices in post-Soviet everyday routines result in people's inclusion into transnational networking and migration.

Other examples of non-religious interest in the Jewish community might be a job in a *yeshiva*, low-cost accommodation and food for children studying abroad through a transnational network, religious festivals of the year cycle, synagogue gathering for elderly Jews with a non-observant lifestyle. Some maintain long-term relations with observing communities to make a *shidukh*¹¹ and find a Jewish woman or a Jew as a bride or groom for themselves or their children. Jewish youth seeking to preserve their ethnic identity attend events held by Stars clubs in synagogues, which assist in their trips to Israel, finding a married couple, and learning the Jewish cultural and religious tradition.

The next key concept for transnational religious networks is “social remittances”—a term introduced by Peggy Levitt to define interaction of transnational actors over national, territorial and socio-cultural boundaries (Levitt, 1998, p. 926). Levitt compares these interactions with the financial transfers made by migrants from the host to home countries. Her research has shown that stable and long-term contacts between migrants and their homeland are not limited to money. In fact, they are transferring newly acquired or revived religious values, ideas and patterns of interaction. She refers to such “social remittances” as “religious remittances”. Thus, “religious remittances” is a transfer of religious values, ideas, beliefs and practices from one sociocultural context to another, as well as their subsequent transformation. These transfers are carried out through the exchange of letters, e-mails, photographs, videos, telephone calls, short-term visits of migrants to their homeland, or relatives to them abroad (Ibid.).

“Religious remittances” carried out by post-Soviet Orthodox Jewry have altered with their integration. After migrating, the majority of respondents have chosen some religious practices to create their own pattern. In fact, they have even recast “religious translations” of professional envoys. This shows in the biographical narrative of Respondent B., born in 1980, New York, USA, into a Chabad family with relatives on the mother's side coming from Vitebsk and Nizhniy Novgorod, currently settled with her husband—*shluchim* in Minsk. She recalls the history of Minsk Chabad community covering the construction of a synagogue, kindergarten and school, as well as the census of Jews. She interprets her and her rabbi husband's goals as following:

¹⁰ Mitzvah—any commandment, ordinance, law, or statute contained in the Torah and, for that reason, to be observed by all practicing Jews. The Talmud mentions 613 such mitzvahs, 248 mandatory (mitzwot 'ase) and 365 prohibitive (mitzwot lo ta'ase). Bat mitzvah—a Jewish ceremony held to celebrate a girl reaching the age of twelve, in which she is given the religious responsibilities and duties of an adult woman. Bar mitzvah—a Jewish ceremony held to celebrate a boy reaching the age of 13, in which he is given the religious responsibilities and duties of an adult man.

¹¹ Shidukh, or shidekh is a marital matchmaking.

No, we do not work only with those who observe. Here's our class in the pictures. These are guys who don't. Our task is to expose them to the Torah, our traditions, history, and give them choice. Their choice. But of course, we want their positive decision. This is our ultimate goal. But first, we want them to be aware of their identity, so that they appreciated being Jews and wouldn't deny or hide it. Then again, it is crucial that younger people should marry each other. To preserve our people. If you have a Jewish family, you can then work with them, and if a guy marries a Russian girl, according to the Jewish law, the child is no longer a Jew, and there is no one to work with. We work only with halachic Jews, which means that the mom is Jewish, well, it is still difficult. Here we are now, we are preparing for the next school year enrolling children in the first grade. There's a family, their eldest daughter has stayed with us for some time. Then they had another little girl. And I really wanted this girl to come to us. It's a good family and a good mom. They came to the meeting and seemed pleased. But the day before yesterday I talked to her, and I was very upset when she said they wouldn't send her. The husband refused to. And I can't say I don't understand him. He's Russian. He has no connection to the Jewish people, except for the fact that his wife is Jewish. They are a non-observing family, but they are not against their Jewishness. Perhaps even proud of it. But still the husband stands in the way, interferes. And so, one of our goals is to get our children to marry each other.

Having lived in the post-Soviet environment for twelve years, knowing well the Russian and Belarusian urban environment, the respondent transforms the transnational pattern of observance by shifting the emphasis to the ethnic component.

Multiple Transnational Identity of the Post-Soviet Orthodox Jews

Transnational religious identity is a combination of practices acquired in the country of origin and those assimilated in the host countries. It is formed through the "religious remittances" of ideas, values and beliefs, their interpretation and further transformation. Thus, migrants perceive themselves as followers of a specific religious doctrine, and only then as members of a particular ethnicity or citizens of a particular state (Khagram & Levitt, 2008, p. 1). The transnational identity is a multiple identity involving local, regional and transnational dimensions. The local dimension means interaction with the family, friends, peers, and membership in a religious organization. The regional dimensions imply the socio-cultural environment. The national dimension involves the political ideology, traditions and customs of the host country, the attitude of governments towards religious and ethnic diversity, and migrants' integration.

I focus now on the identity of the post-Soviet Orthodox Jews who either have not left the place of socialization, or have returned there. They are not migrants in the literal sense, but rather transnational actors in the global networks of religious interaction. Among these are rabbis born and raised in the Soviet Union who migrated and returned as envoys or as leaders of a particular community. They change places travelling from

Belarus to Israel or from the United States to Russia and vice versa. Another example is ordinary members of the Chabad or Lithuanian communities residing in Belarus or Russia with or without Israeli citizenship, who stay for some months with their relatives in Israel, the United States, take religious courses or go on holidays abroad.

The Orthodox Jews define themselves as “returning to the Jewish tradition” (*baalei teshuva*), rather than citizens of specific states. This distinguishes their transnational religious identity from the conventional concept implying that adjustment begins in the host country with the previously acquired religious values, beliefs and practices transforming and being retransmitted to the countries of origin. By contrast, the assimilation of the new patterns started in Russia and Belarus with their refusal to identify themselves with the ideological, socio-cultural context of the country of their socialization. And here it is perfectly relevant to talk about the three contexts of such a “starting point”: the Soviet context of “refuseniks”, who sought to leave the country and were denied visas (1); the entropic context of timelessness and chaos of the “*perestroika* era”, in which the only life-saving straw was the Jewishness of one’s mother or father (2); and the modern context of the islet of Jewish observance in the situation of the post-Christian cultural majority (3).

Returning to the tradition and becoming observant meant becoming aware of the discontinuity in one’s family and country. Most of the respondents have gone a long way to form their model of observance. The pursuit has implied migrating, studying at various Jewish institutions, attending religious seminars and educational camps, meeting different teachers and rabbis. As a result, the transnational pattern of observance in post-Soviet Jews involves the model they confronted at the very beginning of their journey, the model they learned in overseas educational institutions or through incoming envoys and rabbis in the country of residence, and the model of balance between the required and possible in the modern post-Christian and post-atheist environment.

I found that in the biographical narratives of different age groups one of the three models prevails. Respondent H. was born in Tashkent, 1960, into a non-religious Jewish family of a military servant, graduated from the Institute of Technology in Leningrad, migrated to Israel, became a rabbi, and returned to St. Petersburg to start a school, which formed the Lithuanian community:

How did I start observing? Well, I wanted to get acquainted with the Jewish tradition, because there was only the entry in the passport we knew of. Yet to go and learn was not possible in those days. The viable option was to join the Jewish underground community, which wasn’t at all easy. They were adamant. We had one “otkaznik”/“refusenik” (the person, who wasn’t granted the permission to migrate) at our factory. He was an intelligent person with an engineering degree, who worked as a mechanic, which was considered lucky. Do you know about the Jewish “refusenik” movement? No? I’ll fill you in. In short, when Jews applied for the permit to migrate and were refused, the Soviet government stripped them of their social status and canceled their distinctions. They became outcasts in the country where they were born and grew up, fell into the position of “declassified

elements". Are you familiar with this expression? It referred to any kind of deviants, such as drunks, parasites, criminals. So, the waiver of an exit visa placed a man in the "underclass". Their life didn't stop, though. They needed to provide for their families and teach their children. Most "refuseniks" worked at gas boiler rooms, became watchmen, attendants. Most of them had a degree, were the intellectual avant-garde of the time. The "renegade" status meant that they were dead for the state. Anyway, you need to read about that. As to your question, I addressed this "refusenik" at the plant saying: "Mark, I want to learn Hebrew, can you help?" He gave me a phone number and told me to mention his name. I wanted to study Hebrew, not Yiddish. I thought Yiddish was irrelevant to the Jewish identity. Our motto said Israel-Zionism-Hebrew. Israel was perceived as our only hope. What else does a man have when he is cut off from the tradition? There's a country out there where you can be a Jew, live in peace, study, work, have children, develop (...) I didn't think of religion then. I was not a "refusenik", I could not apply at the time, they did not accept applications. I joined the Hebrew group, it was called the Ulpán, which is Aramaic for "the place for education". I didn't know it then. There I began to learn Hebrew. It was nothing serious, a place for the youth to hang out. Mark's sister was there too. She offered me to study the Torah, which she said was "really dangerous". I agreed and got interested. She introduced me to a man, one of the few in the city who did religious texts. Mr. G. worked as a watchman at a construction site, although he was also an engineer. Now I realize that G. had just started to read the Torah, but it was deep in comparison with other groups in the city. And so, I joined them. I gradually became interested in Judaism. It was inevitable. When you immerse in these texts and study complex issues, you take obligations to adhere. After all, it is not solely academic. You begin to observe, like, stop eating non-kosher, then observe the Sabbath, abandon some habits. Many of my friends did the same. What happened next?

In '86 we went on a mountain hike, G. went with us. Once, during a break, we began to discuss our future. Most of us thought that the invincible Soviet government would crush us. The most resentful of us might be released. No one could think of its fall. Foreigners would come and speak of perestroika. We wouldn't listen: it didn't make any difference to us. Our future seemed bleak (...) in a year they started to summon the most notorious refuseniks and offer them to leave. Wow, we were excited! The first stage went smoothly, but we feared that the Soviet government would drop it. No one knew it was about to fall. G. was called on, and he left. Someone had to take up his classes. G. asked me to do it. At that time, I was observing. Obviously, it was necessary to quit the job, because it was difficult to do both. G. quit and so did I. He left in January '87, and in February '88 they began to take applications (...) I applied for a visa and got it in June–July. I had six months to prepare for the move. I took my time and left in December. As soon as I arrived, I entered yeshiva to study. It was a special yeshiva for Jews from the USSR. Then there were several such yeshivas. I was almost 30 at the time. I thought I would study for a year, and then go to work as an engineer because in Israel it is even easier to get an engineering position than in

Russia. But I studied further. First, I studied, then I got married, then I was offered to come here and open a religious school. The Foundation sent me here in '91 and I opened a school, which lasted for 17 years. I was its Headmaster. After the first three years, I was going to leave, but it turned out otherwise. The Foundation agreed to a compromise: I continue my studies in Israel and come here for a while. As a matter of fact, then I got rabbi's *semicha*¹². The funding was cut, and the school had to close leaving behind a community of former students and new people. I will support it while I can".

Another two biographical narratives belong to respondents born in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In younger years, they lived through the post-Soviet chaos of *perestroika* and religious revival.

Respondent H., the rabbi of the district synagogue of St. Petersburg, was born into a Leningrad non-religious Jewish family, 1966, studied in St. Petersburg, and remained in Russia to build an observing Chabad community. H. has stated that his dedication resulted from his mother's instructions. He has highlighted the cluster between his original ideas about observance and the pattern of "religious remittances" circulated at that time by Chabad envoys arriving in St. Petersburg. He communicated with Russian observing families, studied in a yeshiva in Moscow, and helped to build a Chabad synagogue in Moscow, which brought him to stay and return to St. Petersburg for the sake of a yeshiva:

When I was 10, I had a friend, he was not a Jew, but with a Jewish surname. My mother once said to me: "(...) you know what? You and him need to be circumcised? – What? – Circumcised? – What is circumcision? I've heard of it". Mom: "That's how we do it. Jews are circumcised. – Why haven't I then? – Well, when you were born, your grandpa wanted, and I refused. – How come you said no? – In the war they figured us out by circumcision". I was confused then, but started to think of having it. It was the end of '89, Hanukkah.

I also thought of leaving for Israel. I started to convince mom, because I couldn't leave her behind. I begged, but she didn't want. She gave in in six months. We changed the money. 330-odd dollars was it. Rubles to dollars. We got packed. I went to the synagogue at the time. There I asked one friend: "When I come to Israel, say, and want to study in a yeshiva, will they take me?" He said, "Well, of course, they will. But why go to Israel when we have an M.K. yeshiva here in the synagogue". Well, I came to the synagogue and found this M.K. I told him I wanted a circumcision. He pointed at the man standing next to him. I was back from a rehearsal with a guitar. And he says, "Let's go". I was taken aback, asking, "Where to?" – "Well, you wanted to have the circumcision? – Yes, well, I'm not ready. We have a concert in a couple of days. – Do you want to get circumcised or not? – I do. Well, come, then". I did want to. Then came the first Shabbat I observed. On the last day of Hanukkah I was at the concert in C.C. Kirov. M.K. organized it. So, I was slowly getting

¹² Semicha (semikah) is the traditional rabbinical degree conferred by Orthodox rabbis.

into it. On the day of the circumcision, I came home. Mom asked, "Did you get circumcised? – How did you know? – It's the way you walk, I can tell". I had a lie-in for two weeks thinking I did the hardest part. What was next? Shabbat, Kashrut (...) As for migration, it was quite a story. There were two Chabad Chassids I communicated with. I had some classes with M.K. In the morning we would come to the synagogue and study. In the afternoon, David Abramovich would bring some pie, in the evening we had borscht, that's all we ate. On Saturdays, we went to the Sabbath. But then it stopped. M. started a school and wanted to close the yeshiva. We lost touch with M.K. at some point. I was very, as you say, young and hot-tempered. It was all black and white for me. He was building the first school in the synagogue. Now it is on Dobrolyubova str. He expected us to help along. I asked him, "Will you do prayers there?" – "No, not there. It is not about religion". He wanted a non-religious school. I hoped for a religious teacher then, but he wanted a Jewish school. I told him I didn't see the point. "You do not see the point? Oh well, then you are not going to help me". – "Fine. I will not be helping you". At that time, he was already baffled by the school, did not go to the yeshiva. There was another thing with smoking. I wanted to ban women from smoking. Don't know why it bothered me then. I asked my friend to make a poster of a woman with a cigarette wearing trousers, all black and red. I hung it on the wall for everyone to see. The rabbi's wife was a smoker. She didn't wear trousers, but she liked to think she could if she wished to. When she saw the poster, she asked me, "I can't smoke then, can I? – No, you can't. – You can't come here then". So, there I was with no place to have the Shabbat. I was alone in the synagogue; there was nothing to eat. David Abramovich invited me, and I went to see him on the Sabbath [...] Soon I was finally ready to leave, but I had to fulfill the formalities. Once I spoke to one observing friend about my plans, and he suggested asking the Rebbe. Well, how would I do it? We called the Rebbe's secretary and he referred us to the Local Council of the Chabad Rabbi. There was no such thing in St. Petersburg. I went to Moscow to Berel Lazar. I told him that I wanted to leave, to be repatriated, while I couldn't leave or take my nephew with me.

He says to me, "What are you going to do in Israel? – I'm going to study in a yeshiva – Are you sure? You will have to earn to make a living. Your mother is retired. What will you live on?" I said I would let an apartment. He said, "You will hardly be able to study. You have to decide for yourself. I think you should stay". I thought carefully about his words. I didn't want to give up on my nephew. Then again, there was no point in leaving if I had to work there. In the end, I dropped this idea. But I wanted to learn and called Berel Lazar. He summoned me to Moscow. I went there to study, worked in the community, built a synagogue there, yeshiva. Then I married (...) then I came here to do yeshiva. I've been doing it since 1992.

The similar idea of conflicting transnational patterns of religious values and practices within the same community of Jews returning to the tradition can be traced in most narratives. Here is another narrative by Respondent M., a rabbi in Minsk, born

into a non-religious Jewish family in Mogilev, 1969, who studied in St. Petersburg and then migrated to Israel. He also mentions a non-religious reason for returning to the tradition; conflicting patterns of Judaism renaissance in Russia in the 1990s; final stages of integration into the tradition in Israel:

I got to St. Pete in a very bad year, when all the students were taken to the army. And, frankly, I don't remember much of the first year. But then, when I left the army, I met E. (...) I'd always been interested in Jewry. By the way, there was this I. D. in St. Pete. You are not familiar with this name, are you? I'll tell you. He did research into Judaism. He founded the Jewish University of St. Petersburg (SPBP). Well, let's just say I love him very much. In fact, I did my first Sabbaths with him. Before I. D. met E., I attended some of his lectures. Well, I was interested in something Jewish. When perestroika started, they opened up some libraries. You could borrow some books there. I saw an ad for this Dvorkin University. Got interested. I went to see it. It wasn't a university then, it was more of a club with all sorts of lectures, Hebrew classes. You see, it wasn't really academic. There was an interesting guest speaker, we would go and listen to him. Well, I did another two years in St. Petersburg like this. I would come round now and then later. I mean. It was right not to go there more often. You see, Judaism is a lifestyle. See, it's a way of life. And Dvorkin's University was about teaching sacred texts to everyone, Jews and not Jews. I am against academic Judaism. In my opinion, it doesn't make sense to study religious texts from a non-religious point of view. For a historian it's OK. I. D. thought that it was possible to study religious texts with no intention to bring people closer to religion (...) E. taught me different things. He came to Peter in '89 to open a school. He started looking for Jews who might be interested. He went to Dvorkin's University and dragged me with a couple of others out of it. He rented an apartment where we celebrated the Shabbat. He studied there with us in-between his trips. He found a man to take care of us when he was away. He left money for us to spend on the Shabbat. I remember it was spacious there. We boiled potatoes, bought salmon. That was a pretty decent Sabbath, even in the absence of Kashrut. Vegetables, some fruit. We sat there geeking out, talking smart. And the apartment was near the Palace Square. We would come to I. D. sometimes, to one of these Ilya's meetings. Ilya was a very peculiar man. I didn't see him for a long time afterwards. Then he came to Kiev, where I worked and lived with my family. I invited him to the Sabbath. His first words were "You should know I'm against Keruva¹³. I teach people, but never persuade. E. had told us once that we should bring non-observing people to the God, and if it takes to persuade, then be it. So, it is none of D's business, whether his students become observant. It is for them to decide. We do not agree on this. We give them a hand when they are falling (...) What happened then? I didn't get my degree and went to Israel with my parents. I didn't think twice. Everyone went, and so did I. In 1991 we thought it was our heaven on earth. We weren't right. On

¹³ Keruva (lit. 'to draw closer' or 'in-rich') is a concept of Jewish outreach, which is directed at Jews who have 'gone astray', or who have been born Jewish in a non-observant family.

the third day I went to a yeshiva. Then started a course at Machon Lev. I married. I was 25 at the time, mind. I studied at Kollel, worked for Ash-a-Torah, an American foundation for observing Americans. They opened a Russian department with an interesting man at whelm. Ash-a-Torah has grown into an Empire, and he was one of those few who started it. He had a Ukrainian background and chose to work with Russian Jews. He comes from a Canadian wealthy respectable family. Ash-a-Torah claimed that Judaism is smart, so they educated a lot. I used to be a *madrich*¹⁴ at their seminars. They raised a lot of money for the Kiev branch. I went to Kiev. My family came and went back. I would go to see them. The affiliate ran out of money. No clue. Raising money is difficult. I can't do it. I know some wealthy people, but I can't ask them. Judaism teaches that theory is better than practice. I've learnt that I got some things totally wrong. I had a dream once to build an ideal community in Kiev. It was a utopia. I see it now. There was this Belarus project. I joined it.

Two biographical narratives of the 1980 respondents reveal new approaches to the issues of the "Exodus", conflicting transnational patterns, life strategy. Respondent I., born into a non-religious Jewish family, 1981, a former long-term *mashgiah*¹⁵ of the Lithuanian synagogue, contributed to the revival of Minsk observing community, repatriated to Israel. According to him, he has been "emerging into Jewry and observing Jewry" since he was 13. His ethno-religious self-consciousness was formed gradually, first, with the help of his parents, then, through closer observance of the tradition, through the reflection on the conflict patterns of religious practices:

(...) until I got into a Jewish Sunday school in '94, I knew nothing. Before his trip to Israel, my dad went to learn Hebrew for a couple of months. At some Jewish concert, he met his teacher, who had just opened a Sunday school for children. She said, "Bring your son, there're children of his age. He'll like it there". I was almost 13 years old. So, I did. The school was organized by the Israeli Cultural Center. It wasn't religious at all. They did some minimum for Hebrew on the then computers with floppy disks. There I learnt the alphabet. They taught us basic things about Jewish holidays. I enjoyed it, though. I went there every Sunday for several months. I didn't have classes on Sundays at school. Why not go then?

The Sunday school enrolled children for summer camping. Went to the camp, then another one. There I learnt that they had opened the second synagogue with classes for children on Fridays. First, children thought of it as a Sunday school rather than a synagogue. It was some sort of entertainment for them. I spent there 23 years (...) The Chabad and Lithuanian synagogues did not like each other, although they cooperated to deal with common problems. The Chabad community built the one and only mikvah at that time. The mikvah in the second synagogue was not completed. Visiting the "alien"

¹⁴ A leader or teacher in Israeli youth groups.

¹⁵ A supervisor authorized to inspect meat stores, bakeries, public kitchens, and commissaries to ensure adherence to Orthodox Jewish ritual cleanliness.

mikvah was not approved by the Rabbi, so he suggested going to Moscow. Then the husband of my wife's teacher stepped in. He taught at the newly opened boarding school Karlin-Stolin Hasidim in Pinsk. He called the rabbi and suggested a reasonable Jewish approach, saying that anybody can go to a kosher mikvah regardless of politics. As it turned out later, the rabbi of the second synagogue was reluctant to take us out of fear to cause a conflict. Anyway, thanks to Pinsk this case was settled (...)

Respondent V., 1979, St. Petersburg, graduated from the Lithuanian school for girls, distanced from and returned to the community with the subsequent migration to Israel. In her narrative, she emphasizes that the idea to move from a regular school to a Jewish school belonged to her mother and grandmother. However, her decision to move to a religious school for girls in the Lithuanian community had provoked protests from the family. She finished this religious school, but then rejected the tradition and went into it later:

When I finished the 7th grade, my mother and my grandmother took me to Sokhnut summer camp, where you come in the morning and leave in the evening. In this camp, I learned about a non-religious Jewish school Yerushalayim. We didn't mean to migrate. We already had 3 invitations from Israel in our closet. My mom didn't want all that, she would say, "St. Pete is our home". Anyway, this school was fun, because it was so non-Soviet. Academically it was no good, though. I decided to get out of there. My girlfriend left, and I was sad. I was 13 years old, when an adult called and asked for me. They asked me if I wanted to study at their religious school. I think the Jewish Agency probably learnt the phone number through Sokhnut. An all-girls school sounded great. And I told my mom and grandma that we would go for an interview the next day. We did and they took me. I learnt it later on August 29th when they called and asked for my documents. It was a big fight at home. My family changed their mind and thought [...] Still my documents were handed in and I spent my last 3 years of school there. The schools for boys and girls were in different buildings. The first year was good. I philosophized, even tried to observe. I didn't get the point and felt bad about it. It felt like a burden. And all the time felt that I lump stone rests and presses. By the 10th grade, I had quit. Not that I was really observing, just did a little of something. In the 10th grade, I dropped the idea and decided that I was cosmopolitan and not associated with any religion in the world.

I finished school and entered the Academy of Film and Television. I liked the name. My only interest then was rock music. I walked for 4 hours a day with headphones on, all alone. When I graduated from the Academy, all my romance ended, I got lost, I did not understand who I was, I did not understand what to do (...) Suddenly it was over, studies were over. I had to look for a job, and there was none. When I found a job, I still didn't know what to do with myself. I quit that job, worked as a personal assistant. Gave it up again. Then I met a younger sister of one of my classmates who invited me to a religious camp. I refused. But she was

so persuasive. She pressed me, and I agreed. But I never came back. One girl called me for the Sabbath, but I didn't show up. But then God did something to me. During the class, I decided not to come another time. I went to a rock club one Saturday night. After the concert, I ran into a girl from the community in the doorway. I said, "What are you doing here on Saturday?—Well, I made it the last minute. Had to stand in the back". I thought, "Hmm. There are normal people in this community. I need to go again. That was it. It went from classes to the Shabbat".

Conclusion

Most of the respondents speak about their return to the tradition, which their parents or grandparents broke up with in Soviet times. They have a different pattern for the "Exodus". The country of their primary socialization is the country of departure in the context of regular inter-country migration. It is not the country they leave and return to. They go into and come out of the tradition, which they were fully exposed to as adults, having had some awareness as younger people. As a result, when they chose to stay, the country they were citizens of became their host country.

The generation of the 1950s and early 1960s took "refuseniks" as their first role model on the way to the tradition. They went underground to observe and study religious texts. They did everything by themselves under the pressure from the Soviet government. The second component of their pattern was formed after their migration and exposure to religious values and practices communicated in *yeshivas* and colleges of Israel or the United States. Their pattern was finalized when they returned to the country, which they had left. This time they came as rabbis, envoys, experts on the tradition, teachers, volunteers relevant to the Russian and Belarusian community. Interestingly, the voluntary decision to observe at the start of the pattern was made in the context of prohibition and ideological pressure. With regard to religious practices, we can speak of the subjective dimension here. The decision was made in the hope for migration, without any deep understanding of the ideological implications of the observance of religious texts.

The generation born in the late 1960s and early 1970s worked their way into the tradition at the time of Judaism Renaissance in Russia and Belarus. On the other hand, the total ideological and socio-cultural entropy offered a paradoxical combination of diverse opportunities and the lack of clear-cut patterns. In terms of religious observance, this meant studying, working and living in a country with established religious centers, or staying and coping with this chaos of various projects for religious Jewry revival. Those who stayed learnt different patterns of religious transfers from Chabad envoys, Litvak rabbis, or self-taught individuals. When they left for Israel or joined the community later, they were faced with the inconsistencies in the two patterns. Most interviewees referred to the concept of "ideal Jewry" conflicting with the requirements of the community.

The third feature in their pattern is the post-atheist, post-Christian environment they had to operate in. This environment was vulnerable. There were hardly any

stable elements in the community. Even those who had lived and observed in Russia and Belarus for years did not totally reject the idea of migration. Serious immersion in the tradition, compliance with the Jewish family and Jewish home concepts, religious education and upbringing for children are hardly manageable in Russian and Belarusian modernity. The most common option in both countries is forced migration to Israel for the sake of better schooling and more open lifestyle.

Respondents of the 1980s reveal the third transnational identity pattern. This pattern is not fully completed. Most of them have experienced voluntary deep immersion into the tradition as teenagers, as well as a period of doubt and conflict. As a rule, they were exposed to the tradition in Jewish religious schools, where they learnt to observe in the post-Christian majority, non-Jewish sociocultural environment. This made the first component of their pattern.

Going through the stage of distancing and doubts, they tried different models of observance or patterns with no ethno-religious affiliation. Comparative analysis of the St. Petersburg and Minsk interviews has shown that the second component of the pattern was activated by some events. For women, this event was the marriage to an observant Jew, followed by their further joint in-depth study of values and practices. In the male narratives, there was a variety of options, such as a religious school, migration to Israel to study in a *yeshiva* or *kolel*, frequent visits to the country of departure, imprisonment or fatal diseases of close relatives and friends.

It is crucial that with the 1980s generation, the first component of the “Exodus” was formed in the early stages of socialization through Jewish self-awareness and family-run ethnic identity. In most interviews, both in St. Petersburg and in Minsk, the initiators were the parents, who would offer their 13-year-old son or 12-year-old daughter to go to a Jewish holiday camp or Jewish Sunday school. In some cases, parents, especially Jewish mothers, chose for a son or daughter to study in a Jewish secondary school. However, this choice resulted from mothers’ desire for better education with no awareness of the possible ideological consequences for their son/daughter. Thus, the first component of the pattern for this generation meant reflection on the Jewish identity. Later, the respondents would make their own choice in favor of religious education and even observance.

The second component of the 1980s pattern made a revised version of “religious remittances” typical of St. Petersburg and Minsk respondents, who had to compare multiple and partly conflicting religious patterns in their socio-cultural environment. Outside Jewish religious schools, they often examined the Chabad and Lithuanian patterns to make their own choice. Interestingly, some of those who started as Litvaks and went to Israel to study in a yeshiva would return and distance or join the Chabad community.

For the generation of the 1980s, returning to the tradition implied achieving a balance of the religious and secular lifestyles. The respondents of this generation could choose belief or disbelief, secular schools or religious ones, observant Jewry or non-observant Jewry. They established their identity, they took obligations to comply, their lives were bound up with their communities, then they abandoned their communities, and came back with a migration plan.

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